



## TURKMENISTAN MAY TOUR

### TOUR

May 9 – May 16 2019  
7 nights

### OVERVIEW

Koryo Tours continues its amazing Turkmenistan adventures (since 2004) – On this epic journey to Central Asia’s most enigmatic and least-visited country we will see history unfold as we travel from ruined ancient cities to gleaming modern marble-clad towers. From flaming pits deep in the desert to deep subterranean pools of health-infusing water, from colourful desert canyons to the Caspian Coast. Meet local people, learn about their lives and history, their differences and commonalities. As we journey through the country we will see the serious and the sublime, the freaky and the frivolous – join us on this amazing adventure that Koryo Tours simply does better than anyone else – we’ve built this special experience through dozens of visits and the best local contacts and relationships. We look forward to sharing it with you in Turkmenistan!

### HIGHLIGHTS

- Ashgabat - All the highlights and local colour
- Darvaza Gas Crater – the ‘Mouth of Hell’
- Kow-Ata Underground Lake – Natural Hot Spring, 80m below the ground
- Nisa Fortress – UNESCO-listed archaeological site
- Yangykala Canyon – the Grand Canyon of Central Asia
- The Caspian Sea city of Turkmenbashi, and the unique and weird Awaza Zone
- Extend the tour to visit the Capital of the Silk Road – Ancient Merv

*Please note that the itinerary may differ slightly to what is below but your tour leader will do their best to ensure that as much is covered as possible and will also add in extras when there is time such as a visit to a local bar or a funfair. We will make the most of your time on the tour to guarantee the experience of a lifetime.*

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## **BRIEF HISTORY**

The land that is now Turkmenistan and the Turkmen tribe that lives there have a long and bloody history, including guest appearances from some of history's greatest conquerors such as Alexander the Great, Genghis Khan and Tamerlane as well as both Tsarist and Bolshevik Russia and Imperial Britain;

## **ANCIENT HISTORY**

Parts of what is now Turkmenistan have been inhabited since Mesolithic times, and around 550BC the area began its cycle of being part of whatever empire held sway in the region. First in line were the Zoroastrians under Cyrus the Great. The all-conquering Alexander of Macedon replaced the fire-worshippers. Next it was the turn of the Parthians, who founded the famous city of Merv, followed by a succession of less well-known empires such as the Sasanians and Seljuks. The Turkmen tribe; nomadic horse-breeders, moved into the area around the 11th or 12th century and were promptly wrapped up in the world-spanning empires of Genghis Khan and Tamerlane. Finally, after several more changes of landlords, it was the turn of the new emergent power in the region: the Russians.

## **THE GREAT GAME TO THE COLLAPSE OF SOVIET RULE**

It was Russian Tsar Peter the Great's aggressive expansion of Russian influence over the Central Asian trade routes and the British suspicion of Russian intentions towards India that led to the events of the 'Great Game', a tense diplomatic and military cold war between the foremost powers of the age. Often acting through proxy forces, the Great Powers played a decades-long game of chess with the region's borders and peoples until the pressures of World War I forced British withdrawal from the region and the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia dramatically changed the nature of the new dominant regional power. In 1881 the Teke tribe was crushed by the Tsarist army, bringing the region conclusively under Russian control, and in 1925 Turkmenistan officially became a republic in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), in which it was to remain until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Independence was declared on October 27th of that year and Turkmenistan became an independent republic under the leadership of Sapamurat Niyazov, who had been the General Secretary of the Turkmenistan Soviet Socialist Republic since 1985.

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## **THE NATION, THE MOTHERLAND, THE GREAT TURKMENBASHI!**

President Niyazov was re-elected in 1992 with just a smidge under 100% of the vote, and a couple of years later, after having his term of office extended to 10 years, he was named as President for life and Turkmenbashi - Leader of all Turkmen (just where this left those residents of Turkmenistan who are not Turkmen, such as the Russian, Uzbek and Iranian minorities, is unclear). Since then the spread of the President's personality cult has been exponential; almost every building is decorated with a slogan deifying him or praising such works of his as the Ruhnama, (the National book, written by the President, which is a freewheeling examination of History, Poetry, Politics, Quotations and Opinions - a second volume has been added and possession and study of these modern day holy texts are compulsory for all in Turkmenistan) and collections of his poetry. The Turkmenbashi also embraced the twin pillars of Islam and Neutrality, the two principles which guide the nation and the people (subordinate of course to the will and works of the President) and he became well known around the world for his gold statues and enacting legislation to limit such things as beards, gold teeth, smoking (since he himself quit the habit), and true social evils such as miming to recorded music. Under Niyazov's reign it was impossible to separate the nation from the leader. Hence the ubiquity of the slogan Halk, Watan, Beyik Turkmenbashi! (The Nation, The Motherland, The Great Turkmenbashi!)

## **POST TURKMENBASHI**

The Reign of Niyazov came to an end on December 21st 2006 when he suffered a fatal heart attack and passed away. A constitutional struggle ensued between rivals at the higher levels of government which ended with the victory in a general election of Gurbanguly Berdimuhammedov who managed a creditable 89% of the vote (it helped that all those who stood against him also endorsed him in the election). Although sweeping changes were expected under the new regime these have not materialised, nevertheless social freedoms have been slightly relaxed and there is an air of optimism in Ashgabat. Most of the new President's moves have been towards guaranteeing the stability of his country, such as the recent huge oil and gas deal with China, in which 30 years' worth of Turkmenistan's main product will be piped across Kazakhstan to the ever-hungrier People's Republic in the East. Whether this has wiped out the need for diversification of the national economy remains to be seen; watch this space!

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## GENERAL INFORMATION

### KEY INDUSTRIES

Turkmenistan's main products are gas (of which it is the world's 4th largest producer), oil, and cotton. Gas production is the key industry in the country and the nation's future prosperity is closely tied to its ability to exploit its reserves. Currently a pipeline flows through Kazakhstan to Russia and then on into Europe while another is being constructed heading east to China. Plans to construct pipelines into Iran, through Afghanistan to India, and under the Caspian Sea have been thwarted by various geopolitical factors at various times in the last couple of decades. The export of gas to China is of critical importance, as it allows a diversity of customers, whereas previously the entire Turkmen economy had been at the whim of Russia (itself a major gas producer), which was the only transit point for export of the gas. It is hoped that having more than one export pipeline will lead to more price stability and encourage economic growth in the gas sector.

### DEMOGRAPHICS

Turkmenistan's government claims as many as six million people live in the country; this is a widely mistrusted number though. The CIA World Fact Book in 2009 estimated the general population to be 4,884,887 people with around 72% of the population being of Turkmen nationality. The largest ethnic minority groups in the country are Russians (mainly in Ashgabat) at around 12% of the population, and Uzbeks (mainly in the Northern areas) at around 9%. There are also many Iranians, Armenians, Azeris, Afghans, and even Koreans who are native to Turkmenistan. Around 89% of the population consider themselves to be Muslims with the bulk of the remainder made up of Orthodox Christians (primarily the Russian population). The national language of the country is Turkmen but for visitors to Turkmenistan it is probably most useful to speak Russian, as almost every city-dweller is equally fluent in this language and quite a large proportion of the non-Turkmen population of the country are not fluent in Turkmen. Russian can be considered as the lingua franca of the country and almost everyone with the exception of some children and people dwelling in the desert will have at least functional fluency in the language.

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## **CLIMATE AND WEATHER**

The weather in Turkmenistan varies greatly throughout the year and can be changeable. If you neglect to bring the correct clothes for the weather while you are there this is usually not a major problem as there are bazaars and clothing shops in each city, including a large one near to the hotel we usually use in Ashgabat, that sell reasonably-priced clothes for all sizes. Nevertheless we strongly advise that you have clothes for all eventualities. The northern areas of the country are significantly colder than the capital, so if your tour is going to Dashoguz in winter it is worth taking along a warm jacket, hat, gloves etc just in case. Although it is a desert country there is rain in Turkmenistan. In most places this will not cause any problems but when camping in the desert it is a good idea to have something waterproof just in case of this eventuality. Also, when camping in the desert on the tour later in the year low temperatures can be expected; a few degrees below zero is not unusual so do bring or buy enough to keep you warm. Tents and sleeping bags are provided but if you are especially susceptible to the cold, bringing an extra blanket (you can easily buy one in Ashgabat) may be a good idea. For more detailed weather forecasting and other information, check:

[www.wunderground.com](http://www.wunderground.com)

or

<http://www.climatetemp.info/turkmenistan/>

## **ARRIVING INTO ASHGABAT**

Flights arrive from various destinations, usually at unusual hours; late night or early morning for whatever reason. The procedure for international arrivals is pretty straightforward but can take a while; you disembark the plane and walk to the arrivals area. Do not go into the transit lounge no matter who else is going in there. Ashgabat airport is used by many Russians and Indians as a transit location for flights elsewhere so do not follow them or you will end up on a plane to Amritsar or Moscow! First you need to have the visa issued; you show your LOI to the visa officer and he will issue a slip of paper that you take to the next booth and pay the fee for the visa. This varies by nationality with UK citizens having the highest fee at around \$130, others usually range from \$80 to \$100 (all payable in USD only). You then take this back to the visa issuing desk and they stamp the visa in your passport. Proceed through immigration to the baggage claim where you may have to wait for some time as the unloading process can be quite long. Once the bags arrive you simply take them out to the customs area (you need to show the baggage tag to get there) and go through customs procedure, which these days is very simple; usually no hassle at all. Once through there, walk out of the airport where your guide will be waiting to meet you with a vehicle; you can ignore the taxi touts. It is possible to change money in the airport if you like, although not really necessary as you can do this in the hotel also (see below for money matters).

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- Cigarettes – in early 2016 the government of Turkmenistan announced a further crackdown on cigarette smoking in the country. Basically it is illegal to smoke in public, and illegal to bring into the country more cigarettes than are for 'personal use'. While an exact amount is not specified this basically means no more than 2 packs of cigarettes per person. Cigarettes are still sold in many shops in Turkmenistan and the prices range from \$3 - \$10 but do not bring more than 2 packs into the country or there is a real risk of being considered a smuggler and getting into legal difficulties
- Medicine – Codeine is illegal in Turkmenistan, you cannot take in any medicine which contains it under penalty of the law. Please note this carefully and check what medicines you are taking into the country. It is not just codeine, also ANY medications containing tramadol, morphine, opiates or any other similar constituent component that may be considered as narcotic drug regardless of the fact that these may be widely used as painkillers in other countries.

### **DOCUMENTATION NEEDED TO TRAVEL TO TURKMENISTAN**

You will require a passport valid for at least six months after the date of your trip. A printout of the LOI that we send you, although if you have already had your Turkmenistan visa issued at an overseas Embassy you do not need to bring a printout of the LOI with you.

### **BAGGAGE AND FLIGHTS**

Most flights into Turkmenistan allow economy class passengers to check in 20kg plus one carry-on bag. The airline is quite diligent about charging passengers for overweight luggage. It is very important for everyone leaving Ashgabat by plane to note the following; the Turkmenistan airlines staff who work at the check-in desks at the international section are usually horrible people – rude, unhelpful, spiteful, and aggressive. Despite the clearly stated policy on the ticket allowing carry-on baggage in addition to checked baggage limits they will claim that 20kg is the total amount you can take (checked and cabin baggage combined) and will charge you for additional weight (usually USD 10 per kilo). In a country where people are generally friendly and helpful these people to an individual are among the worst people you could ever meet in such a situation. We strongly recommend that you pack lightly (if you buy a carpet in Turkmenistan it is best to ship it home). Please be very aware of this; nobody in the airport speaks English, the other passengers are not likely to step in and help, and the airline staff are disdainful and rude, don't let this ruin your trip; packing light is recommended.

For internal flights you may not need to take any checked baggage (although it is fine to do so) as overnight stays outside of Ashgabat are usually only for one night.

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### **SECURITY AND CRIME**

Petty crime is uncommon in Turkmenistan. Nonetheless, it always pays to be careful when you are travelling especially in cities. Do not carry large amounts of money around. Always lock room doors. There is a safe for the use of hotel guests at reception, which can be used to store valuables.

### **HEALTH AND HYGIENE**

The most common problem experienced in Turkmenistan is a stomach upset. We recommend you pack your own anti-diarrheal medications and any other personal products you think you might need. There are chemists and drugstores to be found easily in any urban areas, that sell Imodium etc but it is of course a good idea to have this with you already. It is a good idea to bring a broad-spectrum antibiotic in case your diarrhoea turns out to be bacterial in nature, or you sustain an infection of some kind.

We also recommend you bring a duplicate supply of any prescription drugs you regularly take, and keep them separately from the main supply in case of loss.

### **INSURANCE**

Medical, Accident and Emergency Evacuation Insurance

Before travelling with Koryo Tours you must take out travel insurance to cover medical and evacuation costs. Koryo Tours cannot be held liable for any medical costs whatsoever. Koryo Tours is able to sell coverage with AXA for the tour - please contact us or see website for details.

### **TRIP CANCELLATION**

If the tour is cancelled by Koryo Tours or the Turkmenistan authorities, we refund all money received minus the bank transfer fee. If the tour is cancelled by the tourist, then our cancellation charges apply. For our full cancellation policy, please see our website.

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### **BASIC PACKING LIST**

- Torch/flashlight – for the camping trip in the desert this will be very useful indeed!
- Imodium or charcoal tablets – some people have a bad reaction to food they are not used to
- digital camera memory – although you can buy more when you are there it is best to have more than enough; you may take more pictures than you expect
- a good supply of any prescription medicines you need
- Spending money – the amount spent by tourists varies greatly but it is very tricky and expensive to withdraw cash in Turkmenistan; there are no international ATMs and only the foreign trade bank in Ashgabat can give cash advances from credit cards, but they charge 3% commission. Bring more than enough cash, especially if buying a carpet
- hand sanitizing liquid – on occasion there may be no soap available
- pocket tissues - most public bathrooms don't have toilet paper

### **MONEY MATTERS**

The national currency of Turkmenistan is the Manat. This can be used by tourists and is accepted anywhere, although it is very hard to buy outside of the country. At the current time there have been large changes in exchange rates. If changing money in the bank the rates can be quite poor working at around 3-4 Manat to 1 USD.

There are places to change money for substantially better rates at times around 18 Manat to 1 USD, although as you may imagine this is a very sensitive subject and should not be raised with the guides. When you meet your tour leader he/she will be able to advise on this and recommend how to go about making exchanges should you wish.

In many places direct payment in dollars can be made. It is very hard to exchange other currencies so best to bring USD if you have to choose. It is important to bring crisp, clean, undamaged dollars; dirty, ripped, or old notes may be rejected.

In almost all cases credit cards and travellers' cheques are not accepted. There are no ATMs.

Changing Money – it is now illegal to buy foreign currency in Turkmenistan, and also illegal to make any transactions in any currency other than the local one (Manat). In reality this means that you can exchange US dollars into Manat (EUR can only be exchanged in a small number of places now) but not back again, so don't change more than you need, or change gradually rather than all at once. While you should now pay for drinks, souvenirs, etc in Manat there are still places that will take USD for larger transactions (such as carpet shops and so on). As with similar policies the exact operation of this policy will differ from the letter of the law but note that you really should bring USD rather than other currencies on the trip and not buy more Manat than you will realistically need

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### **COSTS IN ADDITION TO THE TOUR FEE**

On this tour, in addition to the tour fee and the plane ticket and visa fee, the extra costs you will have are as follows;

- Buying meals not included on the itinerary, buying drinks to go with meals included on the itinerary (other than water and tea/coffee)
- Tip for local guide & driver (recommended daily rate 15-20 USD per tour participant)
- Tipping is common in restaurants so do leave a little gratuity after a meal if you feel it was good enough
- Money for souvenirs, gifts, carpets, etc
- Entertainment expenses ex-itinerary

### **CLOTHING**

Dress in Turkmenistan is generally modest. Overly skimpy clothing, especially in mosques and certain other places is frowned upon. However, there are nightclubs where it is no problem to dress a bit snazzier! Local Turkmen women often wear full length dresses and headscarves in bright colours, and men, especially outside of the capital, often wear a small skull-cap kind of hat or even a large woollen hat, making for great photos if you ask them nicely! The only places where there is a dress code on this trip is when we visit a mosque; women must cover their heads here (a hat or scarf worn on the head is fine). Other than this anything can be worn at all times; even when we swim in the underground lake there is no requirement to wear a specific kind of swimsuit.

### **FOOD AND DRINK**

Food in Turkmenistan tends to be a combination of Russian and Central-Asian influences. It is heavy on meat and bread although salads are served with every meal too, so vegetarians will not suffer too much. Regional staples include Shashlik (barbequed meat or fish), Plov (greasy rice usually served with lamb, and sometimes with fruit in the Northern parts of the country), with common side dishes being French fries, mashed potato, rice, etc.

Local beer is very good (Berk and Zip are the main brands) and spirits such as vodka and cognac, domestic brands as well as imports can be found in most restaurants. Although most of the population are Muslim it is common to find pork, shellfish, alcohol, etc available. Dairy products such as milk, yoghurt, and cheese, are everywhere, as are chocolate bars and candies. Street food can be found in all cities at the bazaar. Tea and coffee are everywhere also.

For your free time and for meals that are not included in the program do ask the guide and tour leader for a recommendation.

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## **FOOD/WATER PRECAUTIONS**

We do our best to ensure the highest level of cleanliness at all of the hotels we use, but it pays to be prudent. The following are some reminders to help you stay healthy. Note that these are recommendations; the food in Turkmenistan is generally clean and perfectly safe to eat:

### Avoid

- Tap water (it is best to consume only bottled water)
- Ice (freezing does not disinfect water)
- Milk (unless it has been boiled or comes out of a can)
- Uncooked vegetables
- Fruit (if not peeled by you)
- Home-made liquor

### Safe Foods and Beverages

- Bottled water
- Carbonated soft drinks
- Hot tea or coffee
- Cheese (if the outside has been peeled or it is in a sealed package)
- Fruit (if peeled by you)
- Vegetables (if thoroughly cooked)
- Beer or commercially-produced liquors

## **GETTING AROUND IN FREE TIME**

On our tours we do like you to have a good amount of free time to explore the area at your leisure. Ashgabat in particular is a very interesting place to wander around, with large areas dominated by giant marble-clad structures built in the last decade or so, and other parts of the town constructed in a sleepier Russian-style. There are plenty of parks, statues, monuments, etc to find your way between and shops, bars, restaurants, and cafés to browse as well. The tour leader and guide can suggest places to go in free time as well as places to go for eating and drinking too; don't be afraid to ask! Local bars tend to cost much less than the 'expat' bars and even if they only have menus in Turkmen and Russian, it is easy enough to communicate what you want by pointing or using a phrase book.

There are various ways to get around the city, on foot is easy in certain areas but you may find that taking a taxi is a good idea to further-flung places. When people say 'take a taxi' in Turkmenistan, they mean that you should hitch a lift: this is very safe and is very commonly done, you simply stand out on the street and a car will stop shortly, you tell the driver where you want to go before getting in and if they are happy to take you there then off you go. In terms of payment, a normal amount for a short journey in the centre of town would be 3 - 5 Manat, or 5-6 Manat if there are 2 of you, perhaps 8 Manat if you fill the car.

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The driver may decline to go where you want, in which case try another car. It is normal for drivers to pick up other people as well along the way. Women take taxis alone very frequently and this is not considered to be dangerous or strange, but of course exercise due caution when doing this. If you don't like the look of the driver or other passengers then simply wave them away. There are real taxis as well in Turkmenistan that charge by the meter, or the hotel can order you a car to go where you want. Remember that most people don't speak English but the names of places can be written down for you in Turkmen or Russian.

Some drivers try to overcharge foreigners, it is fine to negotiate before getting in the car but if you look confident and don't even mention money and simply hand over your 3 Manat this will work better. Please see below for places of interest that you may like to explore in your free time.

### **MEDIA & COMMUNICATIONS**

Local Turkmen channels broadcasting mostly light entertainment in the local language can be found on every television set, as well as Russian music channels and a few Russian and Turkish channels too usually. In the hotels we use in Ashgabat you will be able to watch BBC World News, Euronews and a few other foreign channels. Some bars will have satellite links for international sports channels, so you don't have to miss the football while there.

#### Mail

Postcards are available at bookshops and can be sent from the local post office. Mail usually takes one to two weeks to reach the U.S. or Europe.

#### Telephone and Fax

International Direct Dial telephone and fax are available in most hotels although this can be expensive. Your mobile phone provider will likely not have coverage in Turkmenistan as the Russian company that used to operate services there (MTC) have now left. It is possible to buy a SIM card (basic or 3G) which costs from \$10 upon arrival at the airport. You may need a passport copy to do this and be prepared to queue for a while, the process normally takes around 20 mins! Network coverage is good in Ashgabat but can be sketchy elsewhere, and is non-existent in the deep desert.

#### Internet and email

Most locals use their mobile phones for accessing the internet. The major hotels in Ashgabat now have Wi-Fi for guests, it can be very slow and frustrating but it is there, meaning you should be able to use internet when in the hotel but be prepared for slow service. Many social media sites and apps are blocked so it may be prudent to download a VPN prior to arrival.

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## **PHOTOGRAPHY**

Bring plenty of memory for your camera as you will take more photos than you expect! Video cameras are allowed too.

In some parts of Ashgabat you need to be careful with the cameras. Taking pictures of government buildings can cause problems and if there are guards around, they may ask you to delete the picture. Soldiers often do not want their photo taken either and sometimes shop keepers in the bazaar are not too keen. However, it is common for people to ask for you to take their photo and be very friendly. Taking pictures of shops, etc is usually not a problem at all and local colour is something that makes for great snaps! In general though if you follow these guidelines it will be fine:

- Be careful when photographing near government buildings; this is not permitted though it is hard to avoid in central Ashgabat!
- Do ask local people if you can take pictures of them before doing so; this is basic politeness of course!
- It isn't usually permitted to take pictures in mosques
- Some people do not appreciate having their photos taken while praying or taking part in religious activities

Several museums and other sites in Turkmenistan have kept alive the old Soviet system of charging a camera fee if people want to take pictures inside; this can vary from \$1 - \$20 and sometimes collective bargaining for the group is possible. This is irritating but it is not something we can do anything about. If you want to take pictures at the carpet museum, gift museum, Nisa fortress, etc then you will need to hand over a few Manat.

## **JOURNALISM**

The laws of Turkmenistan prohibit journalists and photographers (full or part-time) from travelling on tourist visas. Neither we nor our local partners make the laws but our work is subject to them. We ask journalists/photographers to please respect our position and DO NOT APPLY for a visa with Koryo Tours.

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## **SHOPPING**

Surprisingly to many there is actually quite a lot to buy in Turkmenistan as souvenirs; the country doesn't just produce oil and gas! Most goods sold in bazaars are imported from China, Turkey, or Iran but there are many folk items that make great souvenirs and gifts, including amulets to ward off the evil eye, products made from camel hair and bottles of vodka or cognac with portraits of the first president. A fine line in tourist tat has also come on the market with snow globes, fridge magnets, and pen holders popping up in many shops. Giant hats and coats can be bought at the bazaar as well as carpets and jewellery (see below for more information), and the ever popular Ruhnama - the two volume holy book of the Turkmenbashi can be found at some 'spiritual' bookshops along with coffee table picture books about the country, and a book on horses written by the second president.

A brief list of some commonly bought items follows. Prices of course are subject to change; this is a guideline, not a menu!

Beer in local bar = \$1 - \$5

Beer in hotel bar or Expat bar = \$10

Fridge magnet = \$3 - \$4

Evil eye amulets = \$1 - \$2

Large Turkmen hat = \$15 - \$20

Turkmen Carpet (2 sqm) = \$200 - \$600 (includes certificate and shipping, see below)

Meal at local café (rice, meat, etc) = \$3 - \$5

Meal at a bar (shashlik, salad, etc) = \$5 - \$12

Meal at a restaurant (various types available in Ashgabat) = \$10 - \$20

T-Shirt = \$5 - \$10

### **Buying Turkmen Carpets**

One of Turkmenistan's most famous products and something that they make to a very high quality. Turkmen carpets are sold in state shops, private outlets and also at the Tolkuchka bazaar; if you buy one of these it is likely to be the most expensive purchase you make while on the tour so do budget accordingly. For a rough guideline expect to pay something in the region of \$600 - \$800 for a 2m squared carpet, hand-made, including certification and shipping to your home abroad. This is obviously quite a lot of money but still it is the cheapest way to get a genuine high-quality Turkmen carpet. Carpets have special significance in Turkmenistan and you will visit the carpet museum to learn about this as well as see plenty of examples on your journey around the country. There is also a Ministry of Carpets in the Turkmenistan government and one of the jobs of customs officers on exit is to make sure nobody is taking unauthorised carpets out of the country. If you like, we can also arrange a visit to the home/warehouse of a carpet dealer who is trusted and has a very good reputation.

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Surprisingly to many there is actually quite a lot to buy in Turkmenistan as souvenirs; the country doesn't just produce oil and gas! Most goods sold in bazaars are imported from China, Turkey, or Iran but there are many folk items that make great souvenirs and gifts, including amulets to ward off the evil eye, products made from camel hair and bottles of vodka or cognac with portraits of the first president. A fine line in tourist tat has also come on the market with snow globes, fridge magnets, and pen holders popping up in many shops. Giant hats and coats can be bought at the bazaar as well as carpets and jewellery (see below for more information), and the ever popular Ruhnama - the two volume holy book of the Turkmenbashi can be found at some 'spiritual' bookshops along with coffee table picture books about the country, and a book on horses written by the second president.

A brief list of some commonly bought items follows. Prices of course are subject to change; this is a guideline, not a menu!

Beer in local bar = \$1 - \$5

Beer in hotel bar or Expat bar = \$10

Fridge magnet = \$3 - \$4

Evil eye amulets = \$1 - \$2

Large Turkmen hat = \$15 - \$20

Turkmen Carpet (2 sqm) = \$200 - \$600 (includes certificate and shipping, see below)

Meal at local café (rice, meat, etc) = \$3 - \$5

Meal at a bar (shashlik, salad, etc) = \$5 - \$12

Meal at a restaurant (various types available in Ashgabat) = \$10 - \$20

T-Shirt = \$5 - \$10

### **Buying Turkmen Carpets**

One of Turkmenistan's most famous products and something that they make to a very high quality. Turkmen carpets are sold in state shops, private outlets and also at the Tolkuchka bazaar; if you buy one of these it is likely to be the most expensive purchase you make while on the tour so do budget accordingly. For a rough guideline expect to pay something in the region of \$600 - \$800 for a 2m squared carpet, hand-made, including certification and shipping to your home abroad. This is obviously quite a lot of money but still it is the cheapest way to get a genuine high-quality Turkmen carpet. Carpets have special significance in Turkmenistan and you will visit the carpet museum to learn about this as well as see plenty of examples on your journey around the country. There is also a Ministry of Carpets in the Turkmenistan government and one of the jobs of customs officers on exit is to make sure nobody is taking unauthorised carpets out of the country. If you like, we can also arrange a visit to the home/warehouse of a carpet dealer who is trusted and has a very good reputation.

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Note, however, that any carpet product needs to be certified before it can leave the country; this includes not only carpets but bags made of carpet and other such ornaments. Very small items are easily taken out of the country inside bags (not entirely legal though) but larger items will need the certificate for sure. Ignore any carpet seller who claims it isn't necessary; it is, and they are just trying to offload their merchandise and the responsibility of certifying it onto you.

We very much recommend that when you buy a carpet you agree a price for the item itself and the certification and shipping. This will be hassle-free for you; you won't have to spend a day getting the certificate, nor bother paying the excess baggage fees on exit, and the postal service is very reliable and usually gets your carpet to you within 2 weeks. For further advice on carpets; what makes a good one, what price to pay, etc, just talk to your guide on the spot. They will be a mine of information about such things.

## **CROSS-CULTURAL MATTERS**

### Attitudes

Turkmen people are generally welcoming of foreigners so you can expect no hassle for simply being from another country; it is not an anti-American place, and visitors of any race, creed, or orientation are welcomed. Generally people's pre-trip concerns are about Turkmenistan being an Islamic country, but this is not really anything to worry about. This is not Yemen, or Saudi Arabia; in general people are very liberal and mostly their relationship to their religion is very casual. We see it as being Islamic in the same way that the UK is a Christian country; this is just the religion that most people practise, and most people don't practise it with much gusto or compulsiveness.

Unlike some of its neighbours (Iran, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan are the states that share borders), Turkmenistan has no trouble with religious fundamentalism or extremism at all. People drink alcohol and women go around alone and have no trouble talking to men; these are simply commonly held misconceptions about the country.

In Ashgabat there is a large Russian element that is highly visible; also there are Christian churches (various denominations). There are no Buddhist temples or synagogues in Turkmenistan

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### General cultural customs

You will find Turkmen to be more conservative than Russians; most of the people working in bars and establishments serving alcohol will be Russians for example, and the clothes worn by Turkmen women in general are more conservative than those worn by other nationalities living in the area. People are proud of their country and do have respect for their Presidents in general, although certainly not to the degree that is evident in North Korea. It is not a wonderful idea to explicitly and constantly criticize the country to the locals as it is considered rude and bad form; however, people there can joke about the activities of their government unlike in certain other countries. You'll find it is fine to approach people to practise Turkmen or Russian; many people can speak English and welcome visitors and find it interesting to interact with you. Although there are some people who try to overcharge foreigners or attempt the odd scam, in general you will find the people warm and welcoming.

The first President of Turkmenistan Sapamurat 'Turkmenbashi' Niyazov quit smoking and as a typical evangelical ex-smoker decided that everyone else was best advised to follow suit. The second President was a medical professional so he agreed with this idea and as a result the habit is quite highly restricted, especially in Ashgabat – you are not supposed to smoke in public and the ban is enforced in many restaurants and other areas; certainly don't smoke near government buildings. However, many people do smoke and as long as you keep it off the main thoroughfares, all will be well.

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## **FREE TIME IN ASHGABAT? HERE ARE SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR YOU:**

### **1 - Serdar Health Walk**

Opened in 2005 this 8km (there is also a 37km version though, don't do it!) was one of the signature projects of the First President's plans to increase fitness in the general population. Once-busy with school groups, army units, and even government ministers forced to volunteer for the walk now you will mostly have it to yourself. The view, from the foothills of the Kopet Dag range over the city, is excellent, but it does involve climbing a 1.5km uneven concrete staircase to get to the top! The main body of the walk is easy, undulating, and scenic, there are no facilities to get more water, snacks, etc so take all that you need. The path reaches its end near the ruins of Old Nisa. Allow a couple of hours for this excursion at least (although the Turkmenbashi said his ministers should be able to do it in 90 mins!), and it is best to arrange a car to drop you at one end and pick you up at the other. There is no fee to do the health walk.

RUSSIAN NAME: Тропа здоровья

TURKMEN NAME: Saglyk Ýoly

### **2 - Old Nisa**

A UNESCO World Heritage Site situated just outside the modern city of Ashgabat. This was once one of the Capitals of the mighty Parthian Empire; an equivalent power to Rome at its peak and a major world power for some centuries. This site was annihilated in an Earthquake in the 1st Century AD and has been under excavation since the 1940, despite being caught in yet another quake, the one which destroyed Ashgabat, in 1948. Much of the treasure of this city lies in the National Museum in Ashgabat or in other exhibitions in Russia but the site itself is well worth a visit for a lesson in how the people of that time lived. Take a guide for a full explanation and allow 2 hours. There is a small entry fee and also a fee for taking photos as well.

RUSSIAN NAME: Старая Ниса

TURKMEN NAME: Köne Nusaý

### **3 - National Museum of Turkmenistan**

A large complex at the southern end of the city. This museum has impressive exhibits on regional history (including much of the treasure of Old Nisa, including the iconic and remarkable ivory rhytons, plus a quirky section about the current President and his remarkable deeds and leadership. Outside the museum is a giant free-standing flagpole that was once the largest in the world. Getting a taxi to this place is easy enough but it can be very hard to find one passing to get away again so consider asking a driver to stay and wait for you. A visit here can take 1.5-2 hours, the entry fee is around \$10 and additional \$10 for a museum guide. Photo fee is 15\$?

RUSSIAN NAME: Государственный музей Туркменистана

TURKMEN NAME: Türkmenistanyň Döwlet Muzeýi

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#### 4 - Carpet Museum

Turkmen carpets are rightly renowned, for their artistry, deep meaning literally woven into the designs, the long history, the practical as well as aesthetic value, and much more. This museum contains some excellent examples from the last few hundred years and also some of the largest carpets ever woven (all done by hand). It is easy to get to by taxi or even on foot as it lies just outside of the centre of the city. A visit here would use up around an hour or so for the casual visitor. Entry fee is \$ (41 manat)? And a guide costs \$ (41 manat)?. Photo fee is \$ (12 manat for each shot)?

RUSSIAN NAME: Национальный музей туркменского ковра  
TURKMEN NAME: Türkmen Halysynyň Milli Muzeyi

#### 5 - World of Turkmen Fairytales

A quirky little funfair/theme park located just to the south of the city centre. This place can be very popular with local families on weekends and on nice evenings. Well worth it for a wander, and mingle, why not try out some of the fairly tame rides. An hour is usually enough time to spend here and the entry fee for foreigners is around \$ (10 manat)?. No guide is available or needed, you just wander around. If taking a taxi it is likely that the driver may not have heard of the official name, so try simply saying 'Disneyland' in a Russian accent, see if that works!

RUSSIAN NAME: Мир сказок Туркменбаши  
TURKMEN NAME: Türkmenbaşynyň Ertekiler Dünýäsi

#### 6 - Russian Bazaar (official name is Gulustan Bazaar, nobody uses this name though)

Handily located in the very centre of town, this covered bazaar is where you can go to buy almost everything you may need in daily life; fruit & nuts, cables & chargers, sweets, kimchi, baked goods, souvenirs, and so on. Nearby is also the Alty Asyr shopping Centre which is a good place to buy cotton goods (tracksuits, towels, bed sheets, etc all made from local cotton, and all very cheap), as well as the British Pub (lone British element = a picture of the Beatles), a shop specialising in the many many written works of the President, and the Grand Turkmen Hotel (a good place to buy carpets)

RUSSIAN NAME: Торговый центр «Гулистан»  
TURKMEN NAME: «Gülüstan» Söwda Merkezi

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### 7 - Berkarar Shopping Centre

Opened in 2016 this massive shopping centre to the south of the city centre (don't try to walk it, get a taxi) contains all manner of shops, bright decorations, mazes of escalators, a good food court, an excellent video games arcade, the best supermarket in Ashgabat (no alcohol sold there though), and an increasing range of higher-end restaurant/nightspots such as Mandarin and Chocolate (places the beautiful people go for nights out, give it a try on a free evening!). The mall has its own fleet of taxis (that cost a little more, but are reliable at least) to get you home after shopping/browsing/etc. Hard to say how much time you may need here as it depends what you want to do; 1-3 hours?

RUSSIAN NAME: Торговый центр «Беркарар»

TURKMEN NAME: «Berkarar» Söwda Merkezi

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## DAILY ITINERARY

### MAY 09 – SATURDAY (ARRIVAL DAY - ASHGABAT)

- **Flights to Ashgabat**(airport code ASG) arrive from many international destinations – let us know which flight you will be on and we will arrange your pick-up and transfer to the hotel. Arriving even earlier is of course fine and can be accommodated
- Today we start the tour with a **group dinner** of some excellent local food, coordination and briefing session, before the adventure ahead!

**Overnight:** Ak-Altyn Hotel, Ashgabat. Situated in the pleasant and walkable old-town part of Ashgabat, with decent facilities and proximity to plenty of places to visit

### MAY 10 – SUNDAY (ASHGABAT)

- **Tolkuchka Bazaar** – the nation’s largest market, built outside the city and home to various sections selling household goods, clothes, the famous Turkmen carpets, camels & other animals, and much more!
- **Ashgabat Hippodrome** – Sunday is a day at the races, with the sacred Ahal-Teke horses in full display
- Afternoon city tour – including city monuments and a good look at the marble wonderland of Ashgabat
- Including **Independence Park** and Monument, **Arch of Neutrality** topped by the gold statue of Turkmenbashi, **Ahal-Teke horses monument**, **Earthquake Monument** and Museum
- Free evening for a night out in the city

**Overnight:** Ak-Altyn Hotel, Ashgabat

### MAY 11 – MONDAY (DARVAZA GAS CRATER)

- **Desert adventure!** We head off in a fleet of 4x4s into the deep desert today
- **Bokhurdag** semi-nomadic village for a look at what desert life is like today and lunch at a local family home
- Onwards to the bizarre **mud and water craters**, scenes of accidents that opened sinkholes in the desert
- Finally we arrive at the stunning and unforgettable **Darvaza Gas Crater**, in the centre of the country and the scene of a 40 year old industrial accident that ended with a giant flaming pit burning to this day. A hypnotic sight and one of the strangest and most spectacular things you can possibly see
- We camp tonight besides the crater, it is best seen at night, dinner cooked on the spot

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**Overnight:** *Desert camping.* camping in the dessert, tents, sleeping bags and roll mats provided. we will also provide tents based on your rooming options. this affords us the best opportunity to view the amazing gas crater from before sunset to sunrise

### MAY 12 – TUESDAY (ASHGABAT)

- We return to Ashgabat, driving through the morning with a stop at a monument to the suppression of the Basmachi rebellion
- Once back in the capital the rest of the day is yours to do with as you please; explore, relax, shop, take a side-trip (drivers are available for hire), we and our local guides can give advice on the spot.

**\*Overnight:**  
*Hotel Ak Altyn.*

### MAY 13 – WEDNESDAY (DASHOGUZ & KONYE-URGENCH)

- We take a 1 hour flight from Ashgabat to the northern city of **Dashoguz** in the Uzbek-majority part of the country.
- We'll explore the local bazaar and get a taste of life in this very different city.
- The ancient silk road ruined city of **Konye-Urgench**, ravaged by successive invaders over the centuries and now hope to minarets, impressive mausoleums, and all manner of historical tales and stories – one of the most important sites on the old silk-road.

**\*Overnight:**

Hotel Uzboy, Dashoguz - This local hotel may be basic although there are not many options in this far flung town. It does offer us the chance to walk out into the local streets and experience life away from the marble city of Ashgabat.

### MAY 14 – THURSDAY (ASHGABAT & KOW-ATA)

- We'll fly back to **Ashgabat** and get on with some more touring activities straight upon arrival.
- **Ahal-Teke** horses are considered as heavenly and sacred beasts in Turkmenistan, this stud farm visit will show you why. Have a ride on one of the horses if you like.
- We then drive on to the bizarre **Kow-Ata** underground lake. A Sulphur-heated lake 100m deep underground. Take a swim, explore the cave, and then have lunch at a shashlik restaurant on the spot.

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- After lunch we will visit a couple of large mosques; first the **Geok Deppe Mosque**, built on the site of a late 19th Century massacre that marked the beginning of Russian dominance in the region.
- Then we see the even more massive **Gypjak Mosque**, built on the site of the 1949 Earthquake that devastated the city, this is also home to the **Turkmenbashi Mausoleum** which we will visit.
- Back to the city for relaxing evening before beginning the final day of this adventure!

**\*Overnight:**

*Yelken Yacht Club - most relaxing and well-equipped place in the whole country. a great way to finish the day!*

**MAY 15 – FRIDAY (ASHGABAT/KOPET DAG MOUNTAINS)**

- A free morning in **Ashgabat** for any final shopping, wandering, relaxing that you want to do and then we meet for a packed final afternoon.
- Cable car ride into the **Kopet Dag mountains** to see a view of the city from above.
- The world's largest indoor Ferris Wheel – yes indeed! A very weird and quite fun trip to this oddity at the edge of town.
- An evening drive around the marble city, stopping at some viewpoints for some great photos of the nighttime illuminations which are very impressive.
- Final dinner of the tour, time for goodbyes and a last night out if you've got the energy!

**\*Overnight:** *Hotel Ak Altyn*





## MAY 16 – SATURDAY (DEPARTURE OR EXTEND THE TOUR!)

### Departure

- Departure day – airport transfers provided for everyone regardless of the time of flight or where you are going

OR

### Extension Day 1: Mary & Margush

- Flight from Ashgabat to Mary, in the centre of the country and the nearest city to the ancient silk road metropolis of Merv
- Visit **Gonur-Deppe** (Margush); another ancient city in this area, with some lovely extent architectural features
- Back to **Mary City** and explore this modern town, mix with the locals, go to parks, bars, etc as you like, a sleepy area with welcoming and friendly locals

## MAY 17 – THURSDAY (ANCIENT MERV – CAPITAL OF THE SILK ROAD)

### Extension Day 2: Ancient Merv

- Excursion to **ancient Merv**, probably the most important city in the world at certain times of its history and a place where you will learn a great deal about the history of Central Asia, the rise and fall of dynasties and cities, the silk road, and human civilisation in this part of the world in general. This vast area is roamed by animals, explorers, extant buildings, ruins, etc. All contributing to a sense of the dynamism of the ancient silk road
- In the afternoon you fly back to Ashgabat for a final rest/night out before departure.

Please let us know if you wish to book an extra night in Ashgabat. the flight should return to the capital at around 8PM - 9PM.. This one is very modern and it lined with some great examples of brutalist apartment buildings

### End of Tour

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## TOUR PACKAGE

### INCLUDED

- Accommodation
- All internal transportation (flight, road)
- Local guide/translator
- All included sightseeing
- Entry fees, permits
- Airport Transfers
- Koryo Tours Tour Leader plus local guides/translators
- An Amazing Experience!

### NOT INCLUDED

- Tips for the local guides and driver (approx 10-15 EUR per day)
- Incidentals (drinks, souvenirs, etc)
- Optional single room supplement of 50 USD per night (not available on the train)
- Visa Fee
- Onward travel from Turkmenistan - we can advise and assist with options though

## ADDITIONAL NOTES

- Please note that when on tour your day-to-day itinerary may differ to what is advertised above. Your tour leader will ensure, however, that everything available at the time is covered, and replacement options are provided where needed. We will also add in extras when there is time (such as a visit to a local bar or amusement park).
- We visit Turkmenistan regularly so know all the best places to go, and how to make the most of your days there to guarantee the experience of a lifetime.
- After the tour, we will send out a list of all participants' emails so you can keep in touch, swap photos etc. If you do not wish to be on this list then please let us know.

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